

The Hamas Predicament: Organizational Challenges in a Volatile Environment

Benedetta Berti and Anat Kurz

The (Brief) Hamas Ascent in Late 2012

Hamas emerged from the November 2012 confrontation with Israel in a position of relative political strength. The international and regional reactions to the armed clashes between Israel and Hamas following a period of escalation in rocket attacks originating from the Gaza Strip revealed that Hamas could count on new allies and boast an additional layer of regional legitimacy. In particular, the confrontation highlighted the importance of Hamas's new relationship with Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, President Morsi's response to the clashes involved recalling the Egyptian ambassador to Israel, labeling Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense "unacceptable aggression," and dispatching Prime Minister Hesham Kandil to Gaza,¹ marking a clear change from the far more "accommodating" attitude toward Israel displayed by President Mubarak during Operation Cast Lead four years earlier. Even though on the ground the new Egyptian administration did not substantially ease restrictions on Gaza, the Morsi government improved Hamas's standing by lending important political backing.² Egypt also played a key role in defusing the hostilities and brokering a ceasefire.

The substantive role Egypt played in the course of the November 2012 operation, together with the widespread perception that the ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood was now a given in the Middle East as a whole, contributed to a firm perception that Hamas had emerged on the winning side of the Arab Awakening. To be sure, over the previous year

Dr. Benedetta Berti is a research fellow at INSS. Dr. Anat Kurz is the Director of Research and a senior research fellow at INSS.

the movement had substantially downgraded its relations with one of its historical allies, the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Moving the headquarters of Hamas's Political Bureau away from Damascus and refusing to support Assad's brutal repression of the internal opposition led Hamas to drift away from Syria and its main backer, Iran, and invest in creating a partnership with Egypt and Qatar. As such, the November 2012 confrontation between Hamas and Israel actually served as a test case to evaluate whether the strategic realignment constituted a sound choice. The answer was overwhelmingly positive.

While the Israeli operation significantly hurt Hamas's military apparatus and capabilities, weakening its ability to conduct armed operations against Israel, let alone risk an all-out confrontation, the movement's de facto control of the Gaza Strip was not challenged. On the contrary, the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, brokered by Egypt, confirmed the "open secret" that Israel in essence recognizes Hamas as the ruling power in Gaza and considers it the main address when it comes to the Strip. Indeed, the same terms set forth in the ceasefire confirmed this notion by setting the stage for indirect talks between the parties with the objective of gradually revoking the restrictions on the movement

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of goods and people in and out of Gaza.³ In the weeks following the December 2012 ceasefire agreement, Israel took some concrete steps to relax its policy on Gaza, for example by extending Gaza's fishing zone from three to six nautical miles and by allowing civilians to resume agricultural activities in areas up to 100 meters from the fence separating Gaza and Israel. In addition, imports in the period immediately following the ceasefire grew: compared to the monthly average for 2012, January 2013 registered a 28 percent increase in total gravel imports (both for the private sector and for international organizations). Similarly, utility vehicles and construction material intended for the private sector were allowed into Gaza for the

first time since the Hamas takeover in June 2007.⁴ These steps were also complemented by Egyptian measures, with an overall – albeit modest – relaxation of the policy on Gaza.

Hamas was therefore able to harness its regional support and the steps undertaken by Israel relaxing some of the economic restrictions on Gaza to maintain its position in the Strip. The organization was also able to save face in the November 2012 round of military hostilities by avoiding an Israeli ground operation in the Strip. Hamas leveraged the relatively quick nature of the war, which reflected Israel's reluctance to risk a prolonged confrontation, bound to result in many casualties, and Jerusalem's readiness to agree to a mediated ceasefire, to brand the three-week war as a victory. In turn, this led to a temporary rise in popularity of the Hamas government – and conversely, a dwindling of the already frail support for the PA, hurt by its spotty governance record as well as by the political stagnation on the Israeli-Palestinian front and the loss of momentum in its campaign in the international arena to garner support for Palestinian statehood. A December 2012 poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that “if new presidential elections are held today, and only two were nominated, [PA President] Abbas would receive the vote of 45% and [Hamas Prime Minister Ismail] Haniyeh 48% of the vote of those participating. The rate of participation in such elections would reach 69%. Three months ago, Abbas received the support of 51% and Haniyeh 40%.”⁵

The post-ceasefire period, therefore, placed Hamas in an especially strong position, enabling it to benefit from regional backing, an easing of restrictions on Gaza, and an increase in the level of public support for the organization.

From Boom to Bust?

Hamas's ascent, however, was relatively short lived, and the initial improvements in the group's regional and domestic position dissipated quickly, leading Hamas from a position of strength to one of fragility. In the regional arena, the movement now finds itself increasingly isolated, both politically and financially, as its new alliances have proved either feeble or fickle. Moreover, Hamas's regional isolation has hindered its capacity to rule Gaza effectively.

First and foremost, the rocky political transition in Egypt spells significant trouble for Hamas. The Morsi government represented a welcome change for Hamas from the attitude displayed by Egypt during the Mubarak years, characterized by suspicion if not outright hostility toward the movement. Hamas greeted Morsi's presidential victory with

enthusiasm, with the group's spokesman, Sami Abu Zuhri, declaring: " Hamas and the Palestinian people express their utmost happiness over the results."⁶ In the months following his victory, President Morsi and his government took steps to show political support for Hamas, including meeting with Hamas leaders Khaled Mashal and Ismail Haniyeh and discussing measures to "normalize" the border between Egypt and Gaza.⁷ In April 2013, Hamas held its Shura council elections in Egypt, where then-Deputy Chairman of the Political Bureau Mousa Abu Marzouk relocated after vacating Syria.

With the ousting of the Morsi government in early July 2013 and the subsequent rise of the Egyptian military-backed new political authority, the relationship between Hamas and Egypt went from "excellent" to "disastrous" in a matter of weeks. Hamas has actually been punished for its close ties with the now disgraced Muslim Brotherhood, with a rampant anti-Hamas media campaign questioning the group's role and presence in Egypt. Even though such antagonistic reports are not new – Hamas was a prior target of criticism and anger due to alleged links with jihadist elements operating in Sinai – the tones and prominence of condemnation of Hamas have spiraled dramatically in the post-Morsi period.

The new political authority in Egypt has cracked down on the flows of goods and people, with the Rafah crossing operating under severely restricted conditions.⁸ More important, the border restrictions imposed on Gaza by Egypt – even more severe than those in place during the

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Mubarak era – have been accompanied by an ongoing military campaign to disrupt the flow of goods through tunnels between Gaza and Egypt. Designed with the stated objective of securing the Sinai area, these measures have resulted in economic hardship for the Gaza population, while also putting significant pressure on Hamas.

The transfer of goods into the Gaza Strip has been coordinated and calibrated by Israel and Egypt, and while there has been no humanitarian emergency since Morsi's ouster, the restrictions have clearly been felt on the ground. Similarly, both the campaign against tunnels and the restrictions on the flow of goods and people have resulted in a loss of revenues for the organization and for its armed wing, the Qassam Brigades, which had directly benefited from the underground

tunnel economy over the previous years. The Hamas government thus finds it increasingly difficult to meet its budget and provide the badly-needed goods and services to the Gaza population. Whereas the average number of truckloads entering the Gaza Strip through Rafah in the first trimester of 2013 was 1,514, the number dropped to an average of 467 truckloads in the second trimester, with 283 and 252 truckloads entering Gaza in June and July 2013, respectively.⁹ In the same period the average number of truckloads going into Gaza from the Israel-controlled Kerem Shalom crossing did not increase substantially, going from an average of 4,481 in the first trimester to 5,112 in the second trimester.¹⁰ Moreover, the regular transfer of civilian goods from Israel into the Strip will not be enough to compensate for the cumulative loss of the tunnel revenues and the economic potential embedded in direct passage to and from Egypt.

Related economic difficulties have affected Hamas's support among the Palestinian public. Already by March 2013, the temporary boost in popularity was reversed. The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that if elections were held in December 2012 PA President Abbas would have been defeated by Hamas PM Haniyeh, yet four months later Abbas earned 52 percent against 41 percent of the electoral preferences, with Fatah gathering 41 percent (against Hamas's 29 percent) in hypothetical parliamentary elections.¹¹ This trend will likely only increase with the resumption of the political process between the Israeli government and the PA under American auspices. If – and if is of course the operative word – there were to be any significant advance on the political front, Hamas's position would be weakened further and its status would become more marginal.

In addition, Qatar's role in supporting Hamas and Gaza politically and economically has been negatively affected by the political changes underway in the tiny emirate. Following the June 2012 transition in internal leadership, with Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani abdicating in favor of his son Tamim, the country's foreign policy adopted a far less involved and activist tone in general, and especially when it comes to support for the Muslim Brotherhood, including Hamas.¹² In this sense, it is highly telling that the new ruler did not mention Hamas in his inaugural speech and that his country did not

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speak up against the early July 2013 ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood-led Morsi government by Egypt's military.¹³ Turkey, another ally of the Palestinian organization in Gaza, seems preoccupied with its own internal problems and with the protracted, bloody civil war in Syria, and while Turkey likely intends to continue to support Hamas, such backing does not stand to be strategically significant. It is noteworthy that in August 2013 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the postponement of his much anticipated trip to Gaza, due to problems on coordinating the trip with the interim Egyptian authority that replaced the Morsi government.¹⁴

Looking Ahead: Choices for Hamas

Not surprisingly, the recent dramatic changes in Hamas's domestic and regional political and security environment have led the group to question its strategy, in turn heightening existing internal divisions. Indeed, internal conflict is not a new phenomenon within Hamas, which over the past two decades has repeatedly been characterized by intra-group tensions along both political and military lines as well as the internal and external leadership line.

In the aftermath of the November 2012 military confrontation between Israel and Hamas, the organization saw the emergence of two trends, first, the rise of the foreign policy and organizational strategy identified with Khaled Mashal. Mashal was instrumental in devising and implementing Hamas's realignment both toward Egypt during Morsi's government and Qatar. His role in forging these links contributed to his reelection in April 2013 as head of the political bureau.¹⁵ The reelection was also seen as a sign that Hamas planned to channel renewed efforts toward reconciliation with Fatah, a policy pushed chiefly by Mashal. This perception was further strengthened by the fact that Mahmoud al-Zahar, the historic Gaza-based Hamas leader closely affiliated with Tehran and strongly opposed to Mashal's attempts at Hamas-Fatah reconciliation, was not reelected in the Shura council.¹⁶ At the same time, the Gaza-based leadership, led by Prime Minister Haniyeh, maintained its position as the new strong center of the group's organizational power. The April 2013 elections confirmed this reality, with Haniyeh replacing diaspora-based Marzouk as Mashal's deputy.¹⁷

Yet with the subsequent difficulties engulfing the organization, both Mashal and the Gaza-based leadership have been challenged, leading

to an intensive internal dialogue on how to face the looming crisis. The organization seems to face two principal choices: pursue either a hawkish course or invest in crisis management.

With declining regional support and growing threats stemming from the official resumption of dialogue between Israel and the PA, Hamas could choose to harden its position. Internationally, it could try to revamp its strategic partnership with Iran. Some voices within the organization, such as al-Zahar, who has been in contact with Tehran even after Hamas and Iran drifted apart, were pushing precisely in that direction.¹⁸ For al-Zahar, this would also be a way to reclaim internal status within Hamas, after his hardliner policies cost him his reelection in April 2013. In October 2013, Hamas announced that Khaled Mashal would be visiting both Turkey and Iran, in what seems an indication of the group's attempt to mend ties with the Islamic Republic. This gesture is especially important as it comes at a time when the Political Bureau's presence in Qatar is increasingly precarious.

To be sure, the rapprochement with Iran may not be so simple to achieve. Given Iran's current leadership change, its direct involvement in the Syrian civil war, and the serious impact of ongoing international sanctions on the Iranian economy, Tehran may not be able to fill the gap left by Egypt and Qatar, neither politically nor financially. In addition, given the relatively recent tensions between the Islamic Republic and Hamas, Iran may play hard-to-get, especially now that Tehran has decided to boost its relations with Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and enhance its assistance toward that faction.¹⁹

At the same time, if Hamas feels more isolated and marginalized, and if it perceives that there is no improvement in the current crippling restrictions on Gaza, Hamas could be tempted to act as a "spoiler" in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. It could do so simply by allowing other groups to resume attacks on Israel, or even by becoming directly involved as a strategy to preserve its position at the forefront of the struggle against Israel. This course of action, however, might well lead Hamas into a confrontation with Israel, which will inevitably cost the group in terms of its popular backing and economic as well as military infrastructure. Moreover, this option would presumably not help much in reinforcing Hamas's regional standing, and this could be the case even if such a confrontation would bring the talks between Israel and the PA to a halt.

A more probable course for Hamas, under the present circumstances and particularly given its military and relative political weakness, would be to pursue a crisis management option. Aware that the internal arena is fluid and keeping in mind that its main interest rests in preserving its control and power in Gaza, Hamas – following the line put forth by Haniyeh and the Hamas-led government in Gaza – could choose to wait and pursue stability and control of Gaza as its outmost priority. Accordingly, Hamas would not rock the boat: internationally, the group could work to preserve its relations with both Turkey and Qatar, while investing in forging better relations with Egypt. This seems unlikely to occur in the short term, but in subsequent months Hamas could try to create a working relationship with the new political authorities in Egypt aimed at lessening some of the restrictions on the border crossings. Certainly this would require some bargaining, with Hamas needing to agree to regulate the tunnels in exchange for the lifting of the restrictions in place at the border.

Managing the crisis would also require that Hamas continue to observe the ceasefire and, rather than becoming directly involved in efforts to sabotage the peace talks, opt for waiting for the process to implode on its own. At the same time, the group would continue to pay lip service to intra-Palestinian reconciliation, without, however, taking any substantive steps in this direction.

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It is also not completely unrealistic to assume that the group could consider moving from damage control to active involvement if it felt this could be to its political benefit. Thus, advancements in the peace process between Israel and the PA combined with economic incentives could push Hamas to invest more significantly in a political integration option, with the aim of establishing institutional coordination with the PA so as not to lose what remains of its political relevance.

In light of Hamas's regional and domestic weakness, the PA itself may remain reluctant regarding power sharing with Hamas. Particularly as long as no agreement with Israel is achieved, Fatah could have an incentive to delay the reconciliation process to make sure that any future concession obtained from Israel can be claimed as its own political

accomplishment. At the same time, a significant advancement in the peace process may empower Fatah, allowing the party to pursue Palestinian reconciliation from a position of strength. Under these circumstances, Fatah might be able to better dictate the terms of the reconciliation, while Hamas might be pushed into accepting them, for fear being marginalized and excluded from the political system.

Implications for Israel

Assuming that preventing Hamas from drifting back toward Iran or resuming violent attacks is unquestionably in Israel's interest, it is important to note that Israel can play a role in influencing Hamas's strategic decision.

The bottom line is that the more that domestic, Israeli, and international policies attempt to isolate Hamas, and the more the group feels it is losing its grip on Gaza and on Palestinian politics, the more Hamas will have serious incentives to act in an unrestrained fashion. Thus even though it is important for Israel to continue to reinforce its deterrence with respect to Hamas, it will be equally important to do so while making calculated efforts to avoid sliding toward an all-out confrontation. This is especially true since with Hamas facing this difficult predicament there is also an added risk that anti-Hamas Salafist factions will try to resume the violence against Israel and challenge Hamas while trying to drag it into yet another cycle of violence.

More fundamentally, insofar as cornering Hamas risks pushing it toward a resumption of violence, Israel could also follow up on the post-ceasefire terms and move to ease restrictions on Gaza further, while taking steps toward economically reintegrating Gaza with the West Bank.²⁰ In turn, this would provide incentives for Hamas to continue to observe the ceasefire. In this context, an arrangement between Hamas and Egypt to normalize the border in exchange for closure of the underground tunnels would also be a positive development from Israel's point of view. Furthermore, firm and serious advancement on the peace process front may well be the best way to weaken Hamas's position and popularity among both the West Bank and Gaza Strip populations, while providing the leadership of Hamas with a reason to pay more than lip service to inter-group reconciliation and institutional integration in the PA.

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